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15 May 1962

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MEMORANDUM OF DISCUSSION

SUBJECT: Meeting attended by The President, Secretary McNamara, Secretary Rusk, Gov. Harriman, Mr. McCone, Mr. Bundy and General Taylor, with Democratic and Republican Leadership of the Senate and the House 9:15 A.M.

1. President opened meeting by expressing concern over deterioration in Laos and its possible affect on Thailand -- stating purpose of meeting was to explain moves decided upon in interests of meeting our commitments to Thailand.

2. McNamara discussed Nam Tha military action indicating 6,000 RLG troops involved - RLG artillery performed well until ordered destroyed -- forces retired orderly with their small arms intact -- military capability of RLG forces that were deployed to Nam Tha area now considered nil.

3. McCone reported overall Laotian military situation, pointing out that Communists held entire eastern section of the country from north to south. RLG held western portion. By reference to the map, McCone stated apparently previously deployed Viet Cong military capability could take over Thakhek or Saravane or Attapeu -- the VC-controlled Mekong in the vicinity Pak Beng and were strengthening their position in Luang Prabang. We therefore gave VC capability of actions of Nam Tha-intensity in several locations with probability of success; however we did not expect an all out military move until Communists had assessed U. S. intentions. Russell asked relative strength, Communist versus RLG; was answered that RLG forces totaled 76,000, Communist forces 38,000 but the Communists were more effective fighters, better led, and possessed a greater will to fight.

4. Rusk then reviewed the political situation, stating Geneva/Vienna agreements incorporated international guarantees against intrusion of foreign troops into Laos - the withdrawal of foreign troops from Laos, and the maintaining of a neutral Laos. Rusk stated the RLG do not have the will nor the capacity to be a military power and, therefore, if foreign troops are withdrawn, the area should be peaceful. Following the establishment of a Souvanna Phouma government, elections will take place and Rusk predicted substantial victory over the Pathet Lao. Rusk questioned whether Nam Tha meant the breakdown in

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the cease-fire, stating Phoumi now willing to talk -- it is necessary to find out whether negotiations will be fruitful and thought Phoumi now more reasonable than before. Rusk emphasized it is quite possible that nothing will come out of the negotiations. Rusk stated situation most volatile -- Moscow is committed to the Geneva/Vienna arrangements but questioned the extent of Moscow influence in Peiping and Hanoi. Rusk expressed concern over Thailand, explaining that Sarit strongly oriented to the West but his long border is seriously exposed.

5. McNamara reviewed his meeting with Sarit -- outlined the dangers of the exposed border, and then explained in detail the planned troop deployment in Thailand as covered in my memorandum on meeting of May 14.

6. The President then stated that we are for a cease-fire now as we were a year ago and favor a coalition government because military action by RLG seemed ineffective and furthermore the British and the French would not go along with militant action. President explained that the Geneva agreements were more favorable to us than we had hoped; that Phoumi had opposed them because he hoped U. S. would intervene militarily. President explained the British and French are violently opposed to Phoumi -- that Plan 5 is no longer valid because of the attitude of the British and the French and the military impotence of the RLG. Therefore our policy is to seek a coalition government, otherwise there is a danger that the entire country can be taken over militarily by the Communists. President stated that Khrushchev has shown no interest in the situation. President then stated in his opinion Phoumi had been wrong all these months -- that the chances of maintaining an independent Laos were not good - but he stated categorically that he will not order U. S. military forces into Laos without further exhaustive study and consultation with Congressional leaders. This statement appeared as a firm commitment on the part of the President.

7. Rusk then discussed the purpose of our deploying troops into Thailand, indicating we must keep this purpose ambiguous, thus leaving a question mark in the minds of the other side as to do so would provide important leverage in the forthcoming negotiations.

8. Dirksen asked McCone why there was doubt about two Chinese Communist battalions entering the combat in Nam Tha. McCone stated, and McNamara confirmed, that all the tenable intelligence disputed the statement and that the Intelligence Community had concluded that there were no Communist forces committed to action in northern Laos.

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